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SUBJECT: DCM Pushes Peace Process in Mindanao Visit

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: DCM and emboff visited the Cotabato area of Mindanao for the fourth time on June 20 through 22 for private meetings and public diplomacy to continue to build support for the peace process and prepare for the Ambassador's visit of July 9-10. In a private meeting with MILF Vice-Chair Ghazali Jafaar, DCM emphasized that the "time is now" for the MILF and the government to make the tough compromises on a peace agreement, and for leaders of all of Mindanao's diverse communities to come together to define Mindanao's future governance (septel). DCM repeated this message in private meetings with Cotabato Mayor and MNLF Secretary General Sema, 6th Infantry Division Commander Ferrer, and local government and civil society leaders. He conveyed the message publicly at three separate inaugurations of USAID projects, attended by local leaders and the media. DCM visited two ongoing projects by the crew of the visiting USS Peleliu working hand-in-hand with the Philippine Armed Forces -- a new schoolhouse and a MEDCAP offering free medical care in remote villages outside Cotabato. DCM received briefings and showed U.S. support for a successful local conflict management mechanism in a region of recent fighting over land disputes (septel). He called on the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team, which monitors the ceasefire with the MILF. At all events, DCM offered assurances that U.S. support, as well as private sector development, would grow further when the missing piece of an MILF peace agreement is put into place. END SUMMARY.

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The Military Perspective  
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¶2. (SBU) In a relaxed, intimate one hour discussion, DCM and 6th Infantry Division Commander Major General Raymundo Ferrer discussed the prospects for peace, together with the commander of the U.S. JSOTF detachment in Cotabato. Ferrer suggested that JSOTF would gain further acceptance and access among local Muslims if it were seen as working together with the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team. He privately lamented the enormous political power, wealth and arms of the local Muslim Ampatuan clan, which complicated the prospects for peace. In a subsequent one-on-one meeting with Brigadier General Ed Gurrea, who co-chairs the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities, DCM heard similar views. (Comment: Generals Ferrer and Gurrea are just two examples of experienced, peace-advocating commanders placed in key Mindanao positions by the Philippine Armed Forces. End Comment) DCM paid his third office call on the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team headquarters in Cotabato, underscoring U.S. support for its mission and receiving an updated briefing of the activities of the 60 person military monitoring team, which also includes representatives from Brunei and Libya as well as a development official from Japan.

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Development and Humanitarian Assistance  
Helps Create Environment for Peace

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13. (U) The DCM inaugurated three USAID assistance projects in two Central Mindanao provinces and the city of Cotabato. A CLIC (Computer Literacy and Internet Connection) event at a rural school perched on rolling agricultural land in the ethnically mixed province of North Cotabato celebrated the receipt of internet access via microwave dishes and donated computers for some 250 students who had previously little contact with the outside world. A ribbon cutting for a water system nearby MILF headquarters in Shariff Kabunsuan Province was attended by local Muslim residents, a newly reelected congressman, and media. Muslim school children, dancing in native attire, and a marching band greeted the U.S. visitors at Notre Dame Elementary school in Cotabato city, where 130 school principals and parent teacher presidents had traveled great distances from across Central Mindanao to receive a total of over 125,000 donated text books. At each of these events, DCM underscored our shared interest in the development and success of Mindanao.

14. (U) The DCM visited two of the USS Peleliu's projects (part of the Pacific Partnership) in remote villages outside Cotabato City. At the ENGCAP in Datu Andung, U.S. and Filipino soldiers were constructing a new elementary school room, while intrigued local residents watched the progress. Down the road at the local high school, DCM and party visited hundreds of grateful local residents receiving free medical, dental, and veterinary care and supplies from doctors and medical staff of the USS Peleliu working side by side with Filipino volunteer doctors, nurses, and interpreters.

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Pushing Peace Through Local Leaders

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15. (SBU) In separate, private meetings with Abhoud Lingga of the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies and Ishak Mastura, Secretary for Trade and Industry of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, DCM discussed how to reconcile differences among the diverse and fractious Muslim, Christian, and native Lumad communities of western Mindanao. He sought to dispel notions that the U.S. was only interested in neutralizing terrorists and overcoming poverty, allegedly neglecting the need for political resolutions to Muslim grievances. While Lingga questioned the value of U.S. JSOTF soldiers in Central Mindanao, Mastura offered unconventional praise. He expressed belief that local cooperation between JSOTF and the Philippine Armed Forces, as well as U.S. support for Philippine Defense Reform, gave Philippine Forces the confidence to avoid hard-line tactics that alienated local populations and undermined the peace process. He added, however, that few local residents were sophisticated enough to recognize this benefit.

KENNEY